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C O N F I D E N T I A L SEOUL 000162

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SUBJECT: LIKELY MINISTERIAL APPOINTEES

Classified By: POL Joseph Y. Yun. Reasons 1.4 (b,d).

¶1. (C) Summary: The Presidential Transition Committee is expected to announce the ministerial nominations as early as January 26 for discussion in the National Assembly session that starts January 28. Though speculation is rife, a few names have started to rise to the top. Han Seung-soo, Special Envoy on Climate Change for the United Nations Secretary-General, is considered the top candidate for prime

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minister, followed by former Foreign Minister Han Sung-joo and Transition Committee Chair Lee Kyung-sook. Career diplomats account for the majority of the foreign ministerial candidates, including Ambassador to Japan Yu Myung-hwan, Former Ambassador to France Jang Jae-ryong, and former Ambassador to Canada Lim Sung-joon. Yim Tae-hee, Chief of Staff to President-elect, is considered a strong candidate for the Blue House Chief of Staff, which does not require parliamentary approval. END SUMMARY.

Prime Minister

¶2. (SBU) There are three names reportedly being screened to become Lee Myung-bak's first prime minister: head of the transition team Lee Kyung-sook; former foreign minister, Ambassador to the U.S. and President of Korea University Han Seung-joo; and former foreign minister, Ambassador to the U.S., and National Assembly Member Han Seung-soo. After a month's worth of speculating, Han Seung-soo, currently the UN Special Envoy on Climate Change, has recently emerged as the top candidate for prime minister and press reports on January 25 say he is all-but-certain to get the job. His extensive experience includes stints as a Seoul National University professor, Commerce and Industry Minister, ROK Ambassador to the U.S., Blue House Chief of Staff, deputy prime minister for finance & economy, foreign minister, and UN General Assembly President, all testifying to his ability - a quality the president-elect values highly.

¶3. (C) Han Seung-soo is not without his detractors. Five years senior to the President-elect, he carries an unshakable "old-boy" image. Moreover, he is often considered a political opportunist, having served in major Cabinet posts in conservative and progressive administrations of the 1980s and 1990s, and has easily shifted party affiliations. A

senior adviser to Lee Myung-bak recently told the Charge that he thought those who had served in previous administrations should not be considered since their ability to survive various administrations showed they did not have strong principles.

¶4. (SBU) Other candidates for prime minister include Han Sung-joo, Acting President of Korea University, who previously served as foreign minister and ROK Ambassador to the U.S. His knowledge of the United States argues in his favor due to the emphasis Lee has placed on strengthening the U.S.-ROK Alliance. Transition Committee Chairwoman, Lee Kyung-sook also remains on the roster as a strong option, with her widely-recognized ability to deal smoothly with all the complexities of the transition team. Many of our contacts, however, expect Lee Kyung-sook to be the next education minister.

Foreign Minister

¶5. (SBU) President-elect Lee has a huge pool of foreign affairs advisers with either extensive diplomatic experience or prestigious academic careers. Whoever is selected will have a far more powerful mandate than the incumbent foreign minister. The incoming administration's plan (subject to National Assembly approval) to merge the Ministry of Unification into the foreign ministry will give this individual control over all foreign and security-related policies, including those dealing with North Korea. Lee's closest foreign policy advisors include Yoo Chong-ha, former foreign minister (1996-98), and Hyun In-taek, professor at Korea University. Yoo headed the foreign affairs policy team of Lee's Grand National Party (GNP) during the presidential campaign. However, given his age, Yoo is unlikely to become Seoul's top diplomat. Meanwhile, Hyun, who is an alumnus of the president-elect's university, is a key member of the foreign affairs subcommittee on the transition team. Hyun, who advised Lee throughout the campaign, is more likely to be the next national security adviser rather than foreign minister.

¶6. (C) According to a close adviser, Lee Myung-bak was initially leaning toward appointing a professor as the first foreign minister, but, after finding out that past foreign ministers with academic backgrounds had typically failed, Lee had decided to go with a professional diplomat. Some newspapers report that Han Sung-joo, also a contender for prime minister, may get the foreign minister job given his ties with the president-elect and experience as Seoul's top envoy to Washington (2003-2005). Among current diplomats, Ambassador to Japan Yu Myung-hwan, Former Ambassador to France Jang Jae-ryong, and former Ambassador to Canada Lim Sung-joon are said to be top candidates. All three have excellent reputations in the ministry. Transition team insiders have told poloffs that another frequently named contender, current Ambassador to the U.S. Lee Tae-sik, does not have much of a chance.

¶7. (SBU) The media has also suggested two politicians could take the job - Park Jin and Chung Mong-joon, both of the GNP. Park, formerly a diplomat and senior aide to former President Kim Young-sam, is famous for his fluent English. He even worked as a translator for former president Kim Young-sam. He is now in charge of drawing up Lee's foreign policy at his transition team. Chung Mong-joon, a businessman and five-term lawmaker, is the vice president of FIFA and the president of the Korea Football Association. He is a controlling shareholder in Hyundai, a conglomerate his father founded and the company at which the president-elect served as CEO. However, both appear to be more interested in seats in the National Assembly, their aides say, and Lee, himself, has said he will not appoint politicians, asking instead that they run for National Assembly seats.

National Intelligence Service

¶8. (C) Former Justice Minister Kim Sung-ho is considered one of the strongest candidates for NIS chief. Choi Shee-joong, a long-time confidant to the president-elect, is also a strong candidate because of his extensive background as both a reporter with Dong-A Newspaper and former pollster at and Chairman of Gallup Korea. Lee Jong-chan, former Chief Public Prosecutor of the Seoul High Prosecutors' Office, is considered a possible candidate for both the NIS Director and the justice minister. Contacts have told poloffs that Kyonggi University professor Nam Joo-hong, a Lee Myung-bak adviser, is lobbying for the NIS post but is unlikely to get it.

Other Positions

¶9. (SBU) Former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Lee Sang-hee, current Defense Minister Kim Jang-soo, and former 2nd Army Commander Kim In-jong are all said to be among those candidates considered for the next defense minister. Apart from the prime ministerial post, transition team chair Lee Kyung-sook is considered more likely to get the Education and Science Minister position. GNP female lawmaker Chun Jae-hee is regarded as a strong candidate for the Health, Welfare & Women's Affairs Minister. Another confidant to the President-elect, Baek Sung-woon has been mentioned as a possible candidate for the Government Administration and Safety Minister.

¶10. (SBU) For economic positions, the leading contender for minister of Strategic Planning and Finance (a new position combining the roles of the former minister of Finance and Economy and minister for Planning and Budget) is thought to be Kang Man-soo, former Finance and Economy vice minister under President Kim Young-sam and currently head of the Transition Committee on Economics (macro and finance). Yoon Jin-sik, former Commerce and Industry Minister and current Vice Chair of the Transition Committee on National Competitiveness, comes in a distant second. There has been little meaningful speculation about who will head the Ministry for Knowledge-based Economy (combining the former Commerce and Industry, Information and Communications, and some elements of Science and Technology). For trade minister, some say the current Minister Kim Jong-hoon, could remain (at least until ratification of the KORUS FTA), particularly given the President-elect's preference for appointing ministers who are experts in their field; but much will depend on who is appointed foreign minister (to whom the trade minister reports).

BLUE HOUSE CHIEF OF STAFF

¶11. (SBU) The frontrunner for Blue House Chief of Staff, a position that does not require National Assembly approval, is Yim Tae-hee, a second-term GNP lawmaker and Chief of Staff to President-elect Lee Myung-bak. Yim's neutrality during the run-up to GNP presidential primaries last year served him well and eventually led to his appointment as the chief secretary to the president-elect. Yim played a key liaison

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role between the president-elect's secretariat and the transition team in shaping the latest Cabinet reorganization plan. But some press reports say that the President-elect has advised Yim to run in the April 9 National Assembly elections. Other candidates for the post include Seoul National University professor Rhyu Woo-ik, who was the architect of many of the President-elect's major campaign pledges including the Grand Canal Project, and former Commerce, Industry and Energy Minister Yoon Jin-sik. Rhyu is a strong candidate for the post, but Yoon seems more likely to run in the April 9 elections.

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